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The SIGNIFICANCE *of the* NAPOLEONIC BEE

Decorative Fabrics of Distinction

STROHEIM & ROMANN

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New York

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The Empress Josephine in
her bee-embroidered robe of state,
as she appears in a painting by Gerard.

The bee of the Emperor as used in one of the textiles of the period.

WHEN Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself Emperor of France, it was in a setting of incomparable splendor. The economy and love of simplicity which had at first characterized The Little General were lost in a dazzling display of magnificence and pomp.

ONE detail of this coronation has always been of rather unusual interest—the Napoleonic bee made its initial appearance. Both the cloak of the Emperor and the white satin robe of Josephine were elaborately embroidered with this device.

JUST what significance did the bee possess for Napoleon, that he should not only adopt it as an ornament for his coronation robes and for the canopy of his throne, but as an emblem which should henceforth occur prominently in Napoleonic decoration?

MANY persons, unfamiliar with the French language, have inferred that the bee stood for the *b* in Bonaparte. But since the French word for bee is *abeille*, that answer is obviously absurd.

SEVERAL answers which seem adequately to account for the significance have, however, been suggested.

SINCE the dawn of history we find that man has shown a special solicitation for the honey-bee because it provided him with two very desirable commodities, wax and honey. The mystery attached to the process of production of these two substances made the bee an object of extreme veneration, and it came to be looked upon as enjoying the special protection of the gods and even as partaking of divinity itself. It became consequently the symbol for representatives of the divine

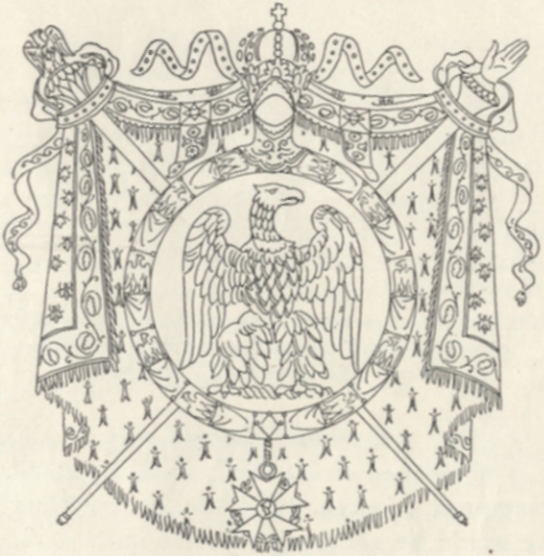
power on earth, and we find it appearing in this capacity as a symbol of the Pharaohs of Lower Egypt. The honey-bee also represented the relationship existing between the perfect monarch and the perfect subject "together constituting the perfect state through the exercise of courage, self-sacrifice, affection, industry, thrift," etc.

NUMEROUS myths have surrounded the bee. There was, for instançe, a superstition among ancient peoples to the effect that the decaying carcass of an ox or bull could create a swarm of bees by spontaneous

The lampas from which this motif was taken was ordered for Napoleon in 1813. Events prevented its use during the first Empire, but it was later used in the Palaces of Versailles and Fontainebleau.

generation. This belief led to the acceptance of the bee as a symbol of the constant renewal of life, a doctrine which was given special emphasis in the Mithraic religion. Soldiers of the Roman Empire, with whom this religion was popular, appear to have carried it into all countries which were under Roman control. In this way it might no doubt be accepted as part of the religion of Childeric, King of the Salian Franks, who died in 481 A.D.

WHEN Childeric's tomb in Tournai was opened in 1653, it was found to contain among other things upwards of three hundred golden ornaments inset with red stones and resembling bees. As to their exact nature there seems to be some doubt. One account states that they were merely *fleurons*, those flower-like but purely conventional ornaments from which the fleur-de-lys may also have sprung. Another authority states that they were indeed golden bees which had been attached to Childeric's mantle and they, as well as a golden bull's head supposed to have been found in the tomb, were evidence of the wide-spread belief in the old Mithraic myth.



Napoleon's insignia shows the outside of the imperial robe ornamented with bees.

At any rate, it seems to be an accepted theory that Napoleon saw some of these ornaments of Childeric's on display in the Palace of Versailles, and that he obtained from these bees or *fleurons* his immediate inspiration for the device which was to symbolize his power as Emperor.

Bees and flowers surround a star in this motif taken from a damask which was used in the Emperor's bedroom in the Palace of Compiègne.

THERE are several reasons why the supposed bee of Childeric should appeal to Napoleon. In the first place, in accepting it he would be adopting a device more ancient than the fleur-de-lys whose introduction as an emblem of the French monarchy was traditionally attributed to Clovis, the son of Childeric. Secondly, if it were true, as we are told, that Charlemagne also employed the bee of Childeric on his insignia, then that device would symbolize Napoleon's official descent from the great Emperor, whom he constantly desired to emulate.

the NAPOLEONIC BEE

OTHER precedents may have encouraged Napoleon in his choice. It is a well known fact that Napoleon's military campaigns furnished him with many motifs which were incorporated into the decorative ensemble of the Empire period. The lotus and sphinx were boldly borrowed from Egypt; the imperial eagle, the laurel wreath and numerous other motifs were adopted from Ancient Rome. Having seen the bee used upon the monuments of the Pharaohs and emblazoned upon the escutcheons of the noble families of Italy (the coat-of-arms of the Barberini family, for instance, was "azure, three golden bees") Napoleon may well have decided that the bee was a fitting emblem for royalty.

A bee motif as employed on the curtain of a work cabinet of the Emperor in the Palace of the Tuileries.

A design featuring the bee, taken from a textile in the palace of Meudon.

Is there not another reason why Napoleon should have looked favorably upon the honey-bee as a symbol of his authority, a reason which would in a way seem more natural and comprehensible than any of the others?

The Emperor never forgot his native Corsica, and its history contributes much to the understanding of his character and the choices of his career. Many of Napoleon's traits—his bravery, his ability to withstand hardships, his pride, his choleric temper,—all seem to have been in-born Corsican characteristics. The little island in the Mediterranean remained for Napoleon always his dominant passion. He loved its rocky coasts and verdant valleys, its dense forests and moun tainous heights. He delighted in the very fragrance which greeted him far out at sea, and we recall his well-known words, "*A l'odeur seule je devinerais la Corse les yeux fermés.*" (By the odor alone I should divine Corsica, the eyes closed.)

Both modern and ancient voyageurs along the Corsican coast have been attracted by this same exquisite fragrance, for the island is a veritable paradise of flowers.

The SIGNIFICANCE *of*

This bee and laurel motif are from a textile used in the grand salon of the Emperor in the palace of Meudon.

Fields and hedges are a mass of bloom. Cyclamen and snow-drop, narcissus and crocus lift up their heads here; forget-me-not, lilies and roses, wild poppies and daisies appear in riotous profusion. In the dense and tangled underbrush or *maquis* which covers the uncultivated parts of the island, grow all the sweet smelling and flowering shrubs, myrtle and laurel, honeysuckle and cistus, pink and white heath.

"CORSICA," wrote Gregorovius, "is the most central province of the great vegetable kingdom in the Mediterranean zone . . . From its central position, the Corsican flora connects itself with that of all the other provinces of that great vegetable kingdom. Through Cape Corso it connects itself with the plants of Liguria; through the eastern coast with that of Tuscany and Rome; through the western and southern coast with the flora of Provence, Spain, Barbary, Sicily, and the east; and lastly through the very high and mountainous region of the interior, with the growths of the Alps and Pyrenees. What a wonderful richness, and what a surprising multiformity in the Corsican vegetation!"

Is it any wonder that such an island has been famed since ancient times for its swarms of bees which have for countless years sipped the nectar from incomparable flowers? When the island was still subject to the Romans, Boswell says that a tribute was imposed upon it of no less than two hundred thousand pounds of wax yearly. He speaks, too, of the "vast quantity of honey produced in Corsica", honey which "hath always been accounted bitter by reason of the boxwood and yew, as Diodorus and Pliny observe". Frederic, son of King Theodore of Corsica, writes in his *Memoirs of Corsica* (which were published in 1768, the year before Napoleon's birth), of the beeswax and honey which were two of the principal products of the island.

In 1784, when Napoleon was still a cadet at school in Brienne, he wrote to his father, "I beg you to send me Boswell, with other histories and memoirs concerning the kingdom." And so in his copy of Boswell, which he assured his father he would return to him unharmed, and probably in the memoirs of Frederic, Napoleon must have read with enthusiasm of that "most agreeable spot in

the world", whose idyllic climate, whose pleasing verdure and whose swarms of bees were fully as familiar to him as they had been to the writers of the annals themselves.

DOES it not seem possible that the Emperor's Corsican birth, which is held accountable for so many of his most notable personal characteristics, should also serve to illuminate in some degree his partiality for certain emblems and motifs which played a part in Napoleonic decorative ornament? Did not the various naturalistic flower and foliage motifs used in Empire design—the honeysuckle and rose, daisy and poppy, ivy and vine, laurel, myrtle, olive, oak, palm and pine —all suggest Corsica to the Emperor? Above all was not the honey-bee especially acceptable to Napoleon as a regal emblem because of its historic association with his beloved island?

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